

## 2

# Vision and School Culture

## Instructional Leaders Build a Vision of Possibilities and a Collaborative Culture

In this *Chapter* ...

- ◆ The school vision—beginning the journey
- ◆ Building collaborative school cultures

Regardless of position, effective leaders are able to create a vision of possibilities within the organization, and according to Barth (2001), “There is no more important work ... than helping create and then employing an inspiring, useful vision” (p. 194). The vision guides, gives direction, brings comfort and stability in times of rapid change, and inspires people to connect to the work needed to improve learning for both students and teachers.

Creating a vision is more than a product; creating the vision is a multifaceted process that requires careful attention to such areas as values, beliefs, and the school culture. There is interplay between school culture and climate in the development of building the vision and mission of the school. As instructional leader, the principal must understand the complexities of the school’s culture as it “reflects what organizational members care about, what they are willing to spend time doing, what and how they celebrate, and what they talk about” (Robbins & Alvy, 1995, p. 23). Vision is critically important related to the work of improving instruction, promoting teacher development, and creating and sustaining a collaborative culture. Therefore, the discussion of establishing a collaborative culture to support the vision for leading and learning will be explored throughout this chapter.

## The School Vision— Beginning the Journey

### What is a Vision and Why is the Vision Important?

A vision is encompassing. Embedded in the vision and by extension the school culture are the beliefs, values, purposes, and goals that when bundled serve as a means to focus the work of the school. Conley (1996) believes the vision acts as an *internal compass*, and Speck (1999) makes a compelling argument that “Vision is what separates the principals who are school leaders from those who are simply managers” (p. 117). Principals who are leaders embrace the opportunity for leading in the development of a vision because the vision is a powerful commitment to the future of the school. The vision makes important statements about what values, beliefs, and ideals the organization embraces about learning, teaching, and relationships.

There are standards in place for the preparation of school leaders most notably by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC, 1996). Although these standards are primarily for the preparation of school administrators, they are important for practicing administrators to have knowledge and understanding. Attention is given to the language of Standard 1 because this standard relates to the encompassing nature of the school vision. Standard 1 states, “A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.”

Vision is embedded in everything a leader does, and the vision serves to:

- ◆ Unify people within the school and its many communities;
- ◆ Focus people on the future and point to what the school wants to become;
- ◆ Promote growth by providing the means for people to stretch while facing the challenges associated with reaching the vision.
- ◆ Empower the organization and its people to hold beliefs and values about schooling—the work of teachers, students, and the opportunities each has for developing.

A school’s vision is the lifeline of the school, and an effective vision is a powerful reminder of what the school and its people are committed to achieving. Figure 2.1 (p. 15) offers an overview of the characteristics of an effective school vision.

Although all members of the school build an effective vision, the leadership of the principal is an absolute necessity. The principal will be called to uphold the values in which the vision rests and to focus and refocus all efforts and resources to this end.

## Leadership and the Vision

Instructional leadership emanates from within the individual, and Krug (1992) asserts “what distinguishes effective instructional leaders from others is not a distinctive set of characteristics but an approach to their work that is guided by a distinctive set of beliefs about what is possible” (p. 441). Effective instructional leaders are able to look within to identify core beliefs that define beliefs about teaching and learning.

### Figure 2.1. Characteristics of an Effective School Vision

A vision must inspire.	A vision that inspires moves people out of their heads and into their hearts. Once members allow the vision to live in their hearts, they freely give of their time, energy, and emotion to the vision.
A vision challenges all members of the organization.	A vision issues a challenge to members and motivates them to aspire to reach for something beyond their grasp. A vision fosters solidarity, solidifies relationships, and boosts morale.
A vision stands the test of time.	A vision over arches the membership—it is the constant from one generation of teachers and students to the next.
A vision is evolutionary.	A vision is a living entity, one that is subject to the laws of life and death. If it is a growing, life producing entity, it will constantly adapt to the future. Visions that do not adapt soon die.
A vision guides members during times of chaos.	During turbulent times, schools that lack an effective vision drift aimlessly and are swept in any number of ways by the currents until they are finally beached on the shore or submerged.
A vision empowers.	An effective vision empowers its members who can act individually and creatively because every action, decision, and solution is directed toward achieving its mission.
A vision exists in the future.	A vision does not live in the past—it is future oriented.

Source: Adapted from Calabrese, Short, & Zepeda, 1996. Used with Permission.

### ***Effective Leaders Listen to their Own Voice***

Building a vision for student success and improved instruction is an ongoing, reflective, and iterative process that begins with the instructional leader looking *within* for the core values and beliefs that motivate her to act on these values and beliefs. As a starting point, reflect on your current leadership position and identify what you stand for as a leader. The following questions can guide this process.

- ◆ What do I stand for?
- ◆ What is my personal vision about teaching, students, and achievement?
- ◆ What does good teaching look like? What separates good teaching from excellent teaching, mediocre teaching?
- ◆ What types of support would teachers need to achieve good teaching as I envision this picture of good teaching?
- ◆ What types of teaching do students need in order to learn? Can all children learn?

Seikaly (2002) offers an exercise (Figure 2.2) that can help in the identification of core values.

**Figure 2.2. Exercise for Identifying Core Values**

<i>Questions to Ask</i>	<i>Tracking Responses</i>
1. School should teach ...	
2. A good school is one that ...	
3. A successful student is able to ...	
4. An effective classroom is one in which ...	
5. A good school / central office staff member (i.e., teacher, principal, supervisor) is one who ...	
6. An effective school faculty / central office division is one that ...	
7. A quality instructional program includes ...	

Source: Seikaly, 2002. Exercise for Identifying Core Beliefs. [http://www.mdk12.org/process/leading/core\\_beliefs.html](http://www.mdk12.org/process/leading/core_beliefs.html) Used with Permission.

The values of the principal are central to the development of an environment that supports learning. Values motivate and give direction: They focus the principal on what is important and why. According to Seikaly (2002), values shape what principals do as leaders. The principal can further clarify values by answering key questions, including:

- ◆ What does the principal plan for?
- ◆ What does the principal monitor?
- ◆ What does the principal model?
- ◆ What does the principal reinforce through recognition and celebration?
- ◆ What behavior is the principal willing to confront?  
([http://www.mdk12.org/process/leading/principals\\_role.html](http://www.mdk12.org/process/leading/principals_role.html))

With an awareness of their own values and beliefs, principals will be in a better position to hear the voices of others.

### ***Effective Leaders Listen to the Voices of Others— They Look Throughout the School***

A vision is not static. Leaders who empower others as “leaders” within the context of the school encourage and purposefully seek out opportunities for community members to create and recreate the vision to fit the needs of the school. Effective leaders invite and encourage a broad base of participation in determining and developing the vision by first asking the right questions and then hearing the answers. Some questions to ask teachers, students, and parents include:

- ◆ What does good teaching look like?
- ◆ What are the qualities of good teaching?
- ◆ How is good teaching supported?
- ◆ What gets in the way of teachers being able to be effective instructional leaders within their classrooms?

The principal who hears the answers to these questions is able to bring action to what is heard. Kouzes and Posner (2001) in their book, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Get Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations*, offer an inclusive and empowering set of practices that can serve as a framework for the principal’s actions. Principals send a clear message of commitment to acting on what is heard when they:

- ◆ **Challenge the process** *by* searching for opportunities and experimenting and taking risks.
- ◆ **Inspire a shared vision** *by* envisioning the future and enlisting others in the development, implementation, and assessment of the vision.
- ◆ **Enable others to act** *by* fostering collaboration and strengthening others.

- ◆ **Model the way** *by* setting the example and planning small gains along the way.
- ◆ **Encourage the heart** *by* valuing others, recognizing the contributions that individuals make, and celebrating accomplishments (Kouzes & Posner, 2001).

*Looking Throughout* requires that the principal commit to finding the time for teachers, staff, parents, and students to have the opportunity to shape the vision because “vision making hardly lends itself to tidy resolution during a two-hour faculty meeting” (Barth, 2001, p. 197). Because “vision making” is at the core of developing a vision that will become the living document of the school, it is suggested that the principal consider:

- ◆ Finding the resources to take the faculty on a one or two day retreat during the summer.
- ◆ Using plan time (one or two days) before the school year begins to get teachers and others framing the vision.
- ◆ Committing time throughout the school year—release days for inservice and faculty meeting times for teachers to have sustained time to identify their values and beliefs.

Finding and using time to include others is important because a vision will only encompass the learning community when the ideas and values of everyone are heard. However, time is sometimes a constraint, given unions, contract agreements, and limitations in the discretionary authority of the principal to obtain funding for release time. The principal will need to scan the environment, seeking opportunities to work within these limitations.

### ***Developing the Vision Is Ongoing***

A vision is brought to life with members of the learning community involved in “purposeful tinkering” (Hong, 1996) by revisiting and refining the vision through intensive and frequent discussion, ongoing reflection, fault-free experimentation, and constant evaluation on efforts and effects of the vision on changes in practice. Purposeful tinkering creates the opportunity for the vision to be examined and modifications made while reaching for the vision.

### ***A Vision Is Only As Strong As Its Culture***

Because of the interrelated nature of values, beliefs, assumptions, and norms, it is almost impossible to speak of school vision and mission without examining school culture because, according to Stolp and Smith (1995), “the culture tells people in the school what is truly important and how they are to act” (p. 14). According to Peterson (2002):

School culture is the set of norms, values and beliefs, rituals and ceremonies, symbols and stories that make up the “persona” of the school. These unwritten expectations build up over time as teachers, administrators, parents, and students work together, solve problems, deal with challenges and, at times, cope with failures. (p. 10)

Leonard (2002) indicates that positive cultures are marked by professional collaboration that is “evidenced when teachers and administrators, share their knowledge, contribute ideas, and develop plans for the purpose of achieving educational and organizational goals” (¶ 4). In healthy school cultures, principals work with teachers; they have a shared vision and mission; they focus on student learning; and they work under a common set of assumptions about learning for both students and adults. A positive culture is *aligned* to goals and objectives that are consistent with the vision and the mission of the school.

A healthy culture does not magically occur. Strong cultures emerge, in part, by the efforts of the principal, and there is nothing more visible than the work of the principal. What the principal and the members of the administrative team emphasize, reward, and sanction comes to symbolize publicly what is important. Fiore (2001) believes that there are key behaviors of principals in schools that reinforce healthy or unhealthy cultures (Figure 2.3).

### Figure 2.3. Principal Behaviors—Healthy and Unhealthy Cultures

<i>Principals in Healthy Cultures ...</i>	<i>Principals in Unhealthy Cultures ...</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Are visible to all stakeholders</li> <li>● Communicate regularly and purposefully</li> <li>● Never forget that they are role models</li> <li>● Are passionate about their work</li> <li>● Accept responsibility for the school’s culture</li> <li>● Are organized</li> <li>● Exhibit a positive outlook</li> <li>● Take pride in the physical environment of the school</li> <li>● Empower others appropriately</li> <li>● Demonstrate stewardship—they protect their school and its people.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Are rarely seen outside their office</li> <li>● Find little time for communication</li> <li>● Feel that other people are responsible for their school building’s physical needs—they take passive roles in decorating and furnishing their schools</li> <li>● See themselves as the lone leader, or “boss” of the school; they never empower teachers to lead</li> <li>● Are poorly organized</li> <li>● Habitually make excuses for their school’s shortcomings, blaming inadequacies on outside influences</li> </ul>

Source: Fiore, 2001. Principal Behaviors—Healthy and Unhealthy Cultures. Used with Permission.

## Building Collaborative School Cultures

Healthy school cultures thrive in environments built through collaboration, trust, and care for the members of the school. School culture can never be built through the sole efforts of the principal, and Lane (1992) believes:

The culture-building mode is not meant to imply that the principal single-handedly constructs the school culture. Rather, it is meant to describe the principal's efforts to influence or shape the existing values and norms of the culture in a direction that best supports instructional effectiveness. (p. 92)

Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1994) assert that collaborative school cultures are dependent on:

- ◆ *Critical elements of school communities*: reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, collective focus on student learning, collaboration, and shared norms and values.
- ◆ *Structural conditions*: time to meet and talk, physical proximity, interdependent teaching roles, communications structures, and teacher empowerment.
- ◆ *Social and human factors*: openness to improvement, trust and respect, supportive leadership, and socialization of teachers. (pp. 4–5)

The principal is in a position to support the development of each of these conditions through a variety of means that range from shared decision making, to implementing peer-coaching programs, and from supporting beginning teachers through formal and informal mentoring programs to providing time for teachers to meet.

Building a collaborative school culture and positive school climate are dependent on several variables, including, most notably, norms and workplace conditions. Norms and workplace conditions are interrelated, and together they form both the culture and climate of the school.

### Norms

Norms are unwritten rules of behavior that serve as a guide to the way people interact with one another (Chance & Chance, 2002). Saphier and King (1985) identify 12 norms of school culture, which, if strong, contribute to the instructional effectiveness of a school. The norms that “grow” a strong school culture and climate include:

1. *Collegiality*: How people interact with one another, the openness members of the community have toward one another.
2. *Experimentation*: Risk-taking.
3. *High expectations*: Do people have high expectations for themselves, for each other, and for students?
4. *Trust and confidence*: Do people trust one another?

5. *Tangible support*: Resources—time, support.
6. *Reaching out to the knowledge bases*: Information is available.
7. *Appreciation and recognition*: People feel important, respected, and part of the school. They feel that what they do is important, and their colleagues, the administrators, and the larger community hold the work they accomplish in high esteem.
8. *Caring, celebration and humor*: People thrive when they feel emotionally supported. Communities take the time to celebrate—the big and small accomplishments of each other and students.
9. *Involvement in decision making*: Decision making spans the school environment and is not just a function of the administration.
10. *Protection of what is important*: Principals and others identify what is important and then protect time and secure resources to support priorities.
11. *Traditions*: Traditions shape the culture and traditions are upheld as part of the community.
12. *Honest, open communication*: People talk to one another; they share ideas openly without fear.

These norms support collegiality and collaboration, the foundation needed to build trust between teachers and school leaders who want to support supervisory practices.

## **Collegiality and Collaboration**

Principals dedicated to fostering the conditions for improved instruction promote collegial and collaborative relationships among teachers. The school climate dictates whether or not teachers collaborate with one another and whether or not interactions are collegial and inviting. Collaboration in schools has been marked as the “key schooling process variable for increasing the norms of student achievement” (Lunenburg, 1995, p. 41). Similarly, Hargreaves (1997) reports:

Cultures of collaboration among teachers seem to produce greater willingness to take risks, to learn from mistakes, and share successful strategies with colleagues that lead to teachers having positive senses of their own efficiency, beliefs that their children can learn, and improved outcomes. (p. 68)

An important aspect of understanding the culture of a school is to know the faculty and the types of learning opportunities available to them vis-a-vis professional development, supervision, leadership opportunities, workplace conditions, and the relationships that teachers have with each other and the administration. Figure 2.4 (p. 22) can serve as a checklist for the principal to reflect about the programs for teachers that shape the school culture by providing opportunities for learning and leadership for teachers.

**Figure 2.4. Programs for Teachers that Shape the School Culture***Programs for Teachers*

- What types of professional development activities are available for teachers?
- How many teachers participate in these activities?
- What types of programs would teachers like to see initiated?
- Are teachers provided time during the day to observe each other teach and talk about what they learn from one another?
- What types of leadership activities are available for teachers?
- How many teachers are involved in formal and informal leadership activities?
- What types of teacher recognition programs are in place?

Source: Adapted from Calabrese, Short, & Zepeda, 1996. Used with permission.

*Professional Development ...*

- Focuses on teachers as central to student learning, yet includes all members of the school community;
- Focuses on individual, collegial, and organizational improvement;
- Respects and nurtures the intellectual and leadership capacity of teachers, principals, and others in the school community;
- Reflects the best available research and practice in teaching, learning, and leadership;
- Enables teachers to develop further expertise in subject content, teaching strategies, uses of technologies, and other essential elements of teaching to high standards;
- Promotes continuous inquiry and improvement embedded in the daily life of schools;
- Is planned collaboratively by those who will participate in and facilitate that development;
- Requires substantial time and resources;
- Is driven by a coherent long-term plan;
- Is evaluated ultimately on the basis of its effects on teacher instruction and student learning, and uses this assessment to guide subsequent professional development efforts.

Source: U.S. Department of Education (1995). *Building Bridges: The Mission and Principles of Professional Development*. Retrieved October 13, 2002, from <http://www.ed.gov/G2K/bridge.html>.

How can a principal promote the authentic norms of collegiality in which teachers take ownership in their interactions with each other? Interactions among teachers would be nestled in an environment that supports:

- ◆ *Interaction and participation.* People have many opportunities and reasons to come together in deliberation, association, and action.
- ◆ *Interdependence.* These associations and actions both promote and depend on mutual needs and commitments.
- ◆ *Shared interests and beliefs.* People share perspectives, values, understandings, and commitment to common purposes.
- ◆ *Concern for individual and minority views.* Individual differences are embraced through critical reflection and mechanisms for dissent and lead to growth through the new perspectives they foster.
- ◆ *Meaningful relationships.* Interactions reflect a commitment to caring, sustaining relationships. (Westheimer, 1998, p. 17, emphasis in the original)

Collaboration is about altering relationships and is dependent on the feeling of interdependence (*we are in this together*) and opportunity. When teachers collaborate, they share ideas and problem-solve solutions to the thorny issues they face in the classroom.

Through collaboration, teachers are able to support growth and development while improving their practices. Collaboration includes such activities as co-planning and teaching lessons, brainstorming ideas, conducting action research, and inter-classroom observations (peer coaching), and the reflection and dialogue that follows in postobservation conferences. To break the prevalent patterns of teacher isolation, time and the commitment of the principal are needed. Collaborative cultures send strong messages to teachers and students about the seriousness of the work accomplished in the classroom. Students benefit in collaborative cultures when teachers work toward the betterment of instructional practices.

## **Trust**

Trust is a prerequisite for building a positive school climate and culture. Without trust, efforts to build a healthy culture will be diminished. Without trust, relationships will flounder. Trust and respect build a strong foundation for the work and efforts of teachers. Bryk and Schneider (2002) identify “relational trust” as the core ingredient for school improvement. Relational trust rests on a foundation of respect, personal regard, and integrity. Relational trust flourishes when all members of the school are encouraged to contribute, learn, and be part of the discussion about teaching and student learning.

Building and maintaining trust evolves over time. Trust is built on its history in the organization and the history of trust between teachers and administrators. A leader must ask several questions:

- ◆ Do teachers trust me?
- ◆ Do teachers have confidence in my actions?
- ◆ Do my words and actions align with each other?
- ◆ Do teachers believe I hold them in high regard?
- ◆ Do I exhibit integrity in the way I make decisions, communicate expectations, and allocate resources?
- ◆ What behaviors have in the past eroded trust in the leadership of the school?

The answers to these questions can serve as a guide to self-discovery about the patterns of trust and the work needed to build more trusting relationships with teachers.

## Summary

As instructional leader, the principal works with faculty, staff, students, parents, and all other constituents who are served by the school to build a vision for learning. Building and sustaining a vision is an iterative process that can only be fortified in a culture that embraces high levels of collegiality and trust. Instructional supervision, professional development, teacher evaluation, and any other programs that support teachers will only thrive in healthy school cultures.

## Suggested Reading

- Barth, R. S. (2001). *Learning by heart*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
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